

Why are there teenagers that still cannot read, and what can we do for them?:  
Presenting a solution based focus for a national dilemma

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### **The Why:**

As Program Coordinator for the Adolescent Generalist Special Education Program at CUNY - Hunter College, I work with special education teacher candidates within the New York metropolitan area every day. I see their struggles firsthand when I observe their classrooms. My teacher candidates are dedicated, amazing individuals who want the best for their students. However, they do not have the time, space, or support to give each of their students what they individually need, even after working a ten to twelve hour day.

When a teen struggling reader does appear in their classroom, my teacher candidates focus on differentiating content for the student. However, they generally do not have the time to focus on basic reading tasks, assuming that these tasks have been reviewed and explicitly taught in previous grades. So, the issue becomes inadvertently ignored (or in limbo), while the student and teacher wait for extra supports/special education services from the district (Harris, 2018). Without a parent, guardian, supporter, or better yet, advocacy from the student themselves – students become lost within the system, and seated in a classroom where text based instruction is the focus. When this happens, the student is not only missing out on basic reading skills they need, but they are also losing knowledge of content. What is needed is a solution based focus to reading intervention. But first, we need to address the root of the problem.

In our schools today, there is a very small window of time where students are allowed the time, space, and explicit instruction to learn to read. We consider “early readers” to be those who read between the ages of 3 and 5 years of age, and “late readers” to be those who read after the age of 7. By age 8, students go from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Moats & Dakin, 2008), and text based instruction is the norm. This gives students in traditional schools an 18 month to 2 year window to learn to read through direct instruction. This is not enough. Remember, development is not linear. Some students do learn to read later, even into their early teen years. However, our current educational system does not allow late reading as a possibility. If students are struggling with reading after age 6 or 7, we tend to refer them for evaluation for a learning disability. Or, we acknowledge that there is a developmental difference in age of reading for some students, and move forward with them just as we move forward with others...differentiating content, but with a “whole class” view of teaching. Either way, there are students who get lost in the shuffle; ignored until a teacher in middle or high school notices that they really, truly can't read.

Therefore, I propose a couple of things. First, let's be more realistic about when students can learn to read. Some students are not ready to read until mid to late childhood. Second,

let us be proactive in seeking good evaluation by psychologists and psychiatrists who specialize in dyslexia and other reading problems. Under IDEA, appropriate evaluation by trained specialists is a must. Thirdly, let us give students the resources they deserve (like one to one intervention and support) early on, so that they don't become the teen that never learned to read because they didn't have those supports. Finally, let us be honest and reduce the stigma regarding what a learning disability really is. It is important that students, teachers, parents, and others know that a learning disability is not a disorder of intelligence. Instead, it is achievement based.

I am a professor that wants to focus on solutions. So, in this article, I propose to focus on HOW we can support teens with neurobiological dyslexia and other, possibly more environmentally based reading problems. Solutions will be focused on intervention and support; teaching with sensitivity to age of the learner, experiencing literacy in many forms and creating relevant and generalizable lessons.

### **Solution 1:**

**To address teen reading issues, we need to focus on one to one tutoring and support, using a research based reading program and direct, systematic, explicit instruction in phonological awareness/phonics/decoding.**

We know, from research, that students with reading issues make great strides after 12 hours of 1:1 explicit reading intervention (Moats & Dakin, 2008). This means that teens with reading issues need access to tutors, teachers, and or reading interventionists that can provide explicit reading instruction. One to one support also provides a “safe space” for the adolescent reader, allowing the reader to make mistakes, and read aloud without the risk of embarrassment and/or teasing. It also allows the time and space for the teacher or reading interventionist to explain why specific activities are important for the learner to master, which makes the connection between activity and long term goal obvious. Most importantly, one to one intervention allows a sense of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to develop between teacher and student. This sense of relatedness (or someone “having your back no matter what”), is a key factor of success when living with dyslexia or a related reading problem (Lauren, 2008).

In terms of the necessity of using a phonics based program, research points to the idea that the human brain needs to process individual sounds before they can put them together (Moats & Dakin, 2008). There is the fear that teens will see a phonics based program as “babyish”, however, teachers should adapt the phonics based curriculum so that it is relevant for older learners. Also, it is of utmost importance that administrators, schools, and districts support paid training for phonics based programs, as incomplete or self taught training may lead to errors in content teaching that can be detrimental to the learner.

Regardless of the program used, intervention does need to include effective assessment focusing on where the student is at in terms of decoding skills, encoding skills, fluency, and comprehension. Once initial assessment is done, teachers and/or reading

interventionists should develop strong goals and objectives with their student – focusing on the students’ strengths, interests, and needs. Intervention should always be focused on providing clear, direct, explicit instruction, and be planned sequentially, with a distinct beginning middle and end. All sessions should provide the student with opportunities for direct practice, and students should be involved in their own progress monitoring. Most importantly, phonics, decoding, and encoding should not be the sole focus of all lessons. Lessons must be interesting, engaging and relevant to the student, taking into consideration the students overall attention span and level of motivation.

### **Solution 2:**

#### **Teaching with sensitivity to the age of the learner**

It is always important, but especially with older learners, to take into consideration the age, needs, and strengths of the learner. One can do this by simple conversation, but also by giving students things like English Language Arts, Strengths Based, and Visual – Auditory - Kinesthetic (VAK) surveys as well (samples can be included in the appendix). It is also important to communicate clearly with the learner, and explicitly explain the reasons why you have chosen the activities you did within the session. One of my teachers uses “video game speak” with her students. All phonics based activities are noted as challenges, and she commonly states to her students that “We need to complete this task so we can ‘level up’ and get to the next task!”

### **Solution 3:**

#### **Use assistive technology, high interest, low level books/articles, audio books and movies to enhance the work you do with your students**

One on one intervention sessions need to be enjoyable for students to have interest in them. Focusing on phonics, decoding, and encoding works for a half hour or forty minutes, but students also need to learn how to love reading while learning to read. That is why it is essential to use apps, books of interest, audiobooks, graphic novels, and visuals/video to enhance the work done during tutoring sessions. It is essential that students see literacy as more than just text based.

However, it is also important to have students read. Teachers tend to focus on finding leveled texts for their students, but it is also important that students read things they want to read, no matter if it is above or below their level. Comic books, graphic novels, and magazines have visual aspects to them and are so helpful here. I want students to always be reading or trying to read, whether it be the nutritional information on the cereal box at the breakfast table or a text on the cell phone in their hand.

### **Solution 4:**

#### **Create lessons that are generalizable to every day life:**

If the student you are working with works at a department store, there is a need to teach relevant sight words such as sale, price, and cost. If they are learning to drive, transportation related sight words such as stop, slow, and speed limit are essential sight words to learn. Think about what the student needs and go from there.

Also, it is always good practice to ask students what they need to learn as soon as possible in terms of reading. Do they need help with a job application? College application? Basic form? Make completing that important paperwork part of your work with them. For example, you can read the material out loud to them, or help them decode it. If the text seems extremely difficult for the reader, record elements of the form for them for later reference, or give them direct assistance in filling out the form. It is so important that older readers see the purpose in learning to read, both for pleasure and for work.

Finally and most importantly, teach struggling older readers self advocacy skills. It is essential that students with disabilities learn to ask for what they need. If they are going off to college, research Offices of Accessibility with them. If they are working or plan to work, talk to them about the power of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and accommodations available in the workplace. Facilitate confidence in older students, so they have the courage to ask for the help they need and rightly deserve.

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